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## Establishing adult lifelong connections for emancipating foster youth

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ESTABLISHING ADULT LIFELONG CONNECTIONS  
FOR EMANCIPATING FOSTER YOUTH

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

---

by  
Tylia Lindsey Jones

June 2009

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FOR EMANCIPATING FOSTER YOUTH

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Tylia Lindsey Jones


June 2009

Approved by:

  
Laurel Brown, MSW, Faculty Supervisor  
Social Work

6-3-09  
Date

  
Lisa Shiner, Deputy Director, Riverside  
County Child Protective Services

  
Dr. Janet Chang,  
M.S.W. Research Coordinator

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which Riverside County Children's Social Services Workers (CSSW's) are establishing adult lifelong connections for emancipating foster youth. Interviews were conducted with CSSW's from the Independent Living Program (ILP) and the Planned Permanency Living Arrangement (PPLA) units. The purpose of the interviews was to identify resources that CSSW's are using to securing adult lifelong connection for youth transitioning out of the foster care system.

Findings indicate a need for policy and procedures to be developed in order assist CSSW's with the fostering of connections between lifelong committed adults and youth preparing for emancipation from the foster care system as well as the need for a generalized definition of what constitutes a lifelong connection.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the faculty and staff of the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino. I would also like to acknowledge my faculty advisor, Laurel Brown for guiding me through this process and easing my stresses and worries. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the administration and staff at Riverside County Child Protective Services for their cooperation and support to conduct this research.

## DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to everyone who has shown me support throughout this two year never-ending process. It has been a long road, but it is finally over!

A special thank-you goes to my husband who has supported me in so many ways and continued to encourage me even when my computer deleted my literature review the night before it was due. I love you and can't express how thankful I am to have had you hold my hand through all of this.

Thank you to my mom who encouraged me to follow my dreams and never doubting in my abilities. I know you are proud of me. To the rest of my family and friends, thank you for believing in me and showing your genuine happiness for my accomplishments.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Problem Statement

In recent years, there has been a shift in focus to the needs of emancipating foster youth. The need to establish a lifelong adult connection for emancipating foster youth has become a priority for Child Welfare. Nationally, over 20,000 youth will emancipate from the foster care system each year (Reilly, 2003). In California approximately 4,000 children will emancipate from the foster care system (Louisell, 2008). In Riverside County, California, approximately 300 youth will emancipate annually (Needell et al., 2008). Research has shown that upon emancipation, foster youth are more likely to deal with issues of homelessness, unemployment, negative contact with law enforcement, and lack of health care (Reilly, 2003). Having a committed adult in the lives of emancipating youth has shown to be a predictor of overall success in life (Louisell, 2008).

Riverside County has begun to shift their focus to the needs of emancipating foster youth. Every year, hundreds of youth will emancipate from the foster care

system in Riverside County. Between April 1, 2007 and May 31, 2008, Riverside County emancipated 272 foster youth from its care (Needell et al., 2008). This number represents approximately seven percent of all of the children in the Riverside County foster care system.

Riverside County has recognized the importance of establishing permanency within the lives of foster youth by adopting the Family to Family Initiative (F2F) and through the implementation of Team Decision Making (TDM) meetings. Most of the work within the F2F initiative is focused on making sure that every child has a permanent home with a lasting connection. The TDM meetings hope to facilitate conversation with birth families, foster families, and child welfare agencies about the best possible placement for children so that permanency can be achieved (Annie E. Casey, 2007).

Such an emphasis has been given to the importance of establishing an adult lifelong connection that it can be found in the Welfare and Institutions Code (W&IC). Welfare and Institutions Code Section 16500.1 (b)(11) states that every County in California is to ensure that every child leaves foster care with a lifelong adult connection. W&IC Section 16500.1 (b)(12) states that

child welfare workers are to make sure that each child is actively involved in their own permanency planning in order to ensure that the child is well prepared for their emancipation and the choices for their future (Legislative Counsel, 2008).

It appears that although child welfare workers have been mandated by the State of California to ensure that each child has an adult lifelong connection, each county has the ability to carry out this mandate how they see fit. Riverside County has not provided it's child welfare workers with guidelines on how to accomplish this. It can be assumed that the lack of such policy or procedure manual is due to the individual needs of each child. It is hard to put into place a policy that will best suit the needs of every child in the foster care system, thus creating such a policy becomes challenging.

Much attention has been given to the need for adult connections for foster youth, however, not much research has been dedicated to exactly how child welfare workers are locating and establishing these adult lifelong connections, but some organizations and states have begun pilot programs and research in this area. It is important to know what resources and steps are necessary to take in

order to establish adult lifelong connections for foster youth and prevent tragic outcomes such as homelessness and unemployment.

#### Purpose of the Study

The intent of this study is to examine resources that child welfare workers use to ensure that each child emancipates with an identified lifelong adult connection. In addition to locating resources used by child welfare workers, this research hopes to identify how successful child welfare workers are at obtaining and maintaining these connections.

Research has shown that youth with identified adult connections are more likely to have overall life success. It will be important to identify the variables the child welfare worker believes will make successful connections versus connections that fade over time. Another area of interest for this study is to identify whether these lifelong connections come in the form of biological family, non-related extended family members (NREFM's), or another adult in the community such as a foster parent.

Services are currently available through the Independent Living Program (ILP) to assist youth with

such things as managing money, locating and obtaining employment, and assistance with higher education. It is the goal of this research to yield ways in which foster youth can establish adult connections just as they obtain other needed services. This research further seeks to understand if the adult connections that youth identify are more of an "accidental" happening or of an intentional effort. In other words, this study seeks to understand if foster parents, biological family members, or NREFM's simply become attached to the children in their care and seek to care for them on a more permanent basis, or if the social worker and/or caregiver make intentional steps toward permanency and establishing a connection.

The overall method used in this study is a qualitative design. The goal is to elicit the responses of child welfare workers from Riverside County. Planned Permanency Living Arrangement (PPLA) social workers and Independent Living Program (ILP) social workers will be interviewed to assess what techniques have been employed to achieve lifelong adult connections with foster youth as well as the success of these connections. In addition to understanding what resources are being used, it is

equally important to assess whether or not child welfare workers are aware of the different resources available to aid them in locating lifelong adult connections for the youth on their caseloads.

#### Significance of the Project for Social Work

This study has a direct impact on the social work profession. Most importantly, this study will assist child welfare workers in becoming aware of what resources are available to them. Awareness of different resources and tools may have a lasting impact on youth in the foster care system. If adult connections can be identified prior to emancipation, it can be assumed that there will be less of a dependence of social services in the future such as welfare. It can also be assumed that with a positive adult influence that youth will be less likely to become involved in the criminal justice system as well as a decrease in the occurrence of homelessness among emancipated youth. Identifying adults who are willing to make a lasting connection to a youth may make the transition from foster care to independence smoother, thereby decreasing any anxiety or worry the child may have prior to emancipation.

This study may impact social work policies regarding implementing proven methods of locating committed adults for foster youth. Having policies mandating that child welfare workers ensure that each child has a committed lifelong adult connection is not enough. It is important to implement specific strategies in order to ensure that this is done. Identifying and implementing resources used by child welfare workers to locate adult lifelong connections for foster youth will have a positive impact on the lives of emancipating foster youth.

This research will contribute to social work research by assisting in the preliminary gathering of information regarding how child welfare workers are establishing adult connections for emancipating youth. Little information has been gathered in this area and this study would facilitate the need for more comprehensive studies in the future. Such research would benefit Riverside County in various ways. This study hopes to educate child welfare workers as to the importance of establishing adult lifelong connections. It is unknown if all child welfare workers are aware of the outcomes for emancipated foster youth and how adult connections play a major role in their success. As a

result of this study, Riverside County may adopt a method to establish adult connections or conduct additional research to determine the best ways in which adult connections can be established. Overall, this study hopes to impact Riverside County child welfare workers by bringing awareness to the importance of establishing adult connections and the need for continued research in this area.



## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

A review of related literature shows that little research has been dedicated to determine what resources are used by child welfare workers to locate lifelong adult connections for youth. Rather, much of the research has focused on the need for supportive adults in the lives of emancipating foster youth. This need will be evidenced through a discussion of the outcomes for youth exiting care. Research shows that with a supportive connection, foster youth tend to struggle less with education, employment, housing, and have issues with the law (Reilly, 2003). A discussion of the research found will identify gaps in which leads to the need for further research to be conducted in this area.

Some reference will also be given to a few resources available to assist in locating adult lifelong connections such as the Permanency Pact created by the FosterClub, Incorporated (2008) and the "Six Steps To Find a Family Approach" developed by The National Resource Center For Family Centered Practice And

Permanency Planning (Lousiell, 2008). A theoretical framework will be presented to validate the need for supportive adults in the lives of foster children.

#### Outcomes for Emancipated Foster Youth

Much has been written about the outcomes for emancipating foster youth. Mendes and Moslehuddin (2005) found that youth exiting from care experienced a higher degree of difficulty in life. They referred to emancipating youth as "care leavers" and stated that youth exiting foster care experienced homelessness, negative involvement with the law, increased use of drugs and alcohol, prostitution, lack of educational resources, and mental and physical health problems.

Mendes and Moslehuddin (2005) examined the policies in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia that have an effect on the outcomes of "care leavers". The method used to conduct their research was secondary data analysis. They used existing data from each of the three countries and compared them to view their similarities. Their findings suggest that the average American does not view their children as ready to leave the home until age 26, however foster youth are no longer

provided with the support of the child welfare system once they emancipate after the age of 18. They report that approximately 18,000 to 20,000 foster youth exit care annually from the United States. They found that youth in the US, UK, and Australia faced the same difficulties once emancipated from care. Mendes and Moslehuddin note that although the US government has attempted to aid these problems through the passing of the 1986 Independent Living Initiative and the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, foster youth still face dismal outcomes (2006).

Mech (1994) found that youth were more likely to have educational deficits with approximately 37% of former foster youth obtaining a high school diploma. Mech used a qualitative design using an interview schedule, interviewing 277 former foster youth. He assessed their education, employment, substance abuse issues, connections to family, preparation for independent living, and socio-emotional adjustment. In regards to employment, approximately one-third of the youth were found to have either full or part-time employment while another third were found to be using welfare or cash-aide.

In a study conducted by Reilly (2003), 100 former foster youth were interviewed to assess their outcomes after transitioning from care in the state of Arizona. In regards to education, almost one-half had exited the foster care system without obtaining a high school diploma. Over one-third of the youth interviewed stated that there had been times when they found themselves homeless without a place to live. In regards to health care, half of all youth interviewed reported that they needed health care but did not have a way of accessing it. Half of the youth reported that they felt that they had someone they could rely on if they encountered troubling times.

#### Evidence for the Need of Adult Lifelong Connections

Previous studies have shown that chances for youth to become successful after emancipation were diminished if there was not a supportive adult identified. Mech (1994) reported that transitional supports were needed in order to provide the youth with ties to the community during their most vulnerable stage. Findings of this study stated that approximately 37% of youth who exited out of care report that they did not have contact with

their biological family, but reported that they did have some contact with their former foster families.

Fox and Berrick (2007) found in their study that having established relationships played a significant role in the lives of foster youth. They reported that maintaining relationships influenced the youth's perceptions of security, well-being, and family. It further provided them with a feeling of permanence. Fox and Berrick employed the secondary data analysis to compute their findings. They reviewed over two dozen studies that examined the experiences of current and former foster youth.

Reilly's study (2003) found that youth had a high level of overall satisfaction in their lives if they had a support system in place. Youth with smaller support systems were more likely to have been homeless at some point. Reilly concluded this research by stating that youth with an identified connection in place had a more successful transition into the community. The person of support was able to provide resources to the youth in case of an unexpected event that the youth was unprepared for.

## Available Resources for Foster Youth

FosterClub, Inc. is a national organization comprised of foster youth. FosterClub Inc.'s goal is to educate, organize, and motivate young people in the foster care system (FosterClub, Inc., 2008). FosterClub Inc. has developed the Permanency Pact. This is an agreement made between the child welfare worker, the identified adult connection and the foster youth. The goal of the pact is to ensure that upon emancipation, the youth have a written agreement between them and the identified adult connection that will allow them to have a sense of security and belonging. The Permanency Pact identifies 45 ways in which an adult can be a lifelong connection to a foster youth. Some examples include providing a home for the holidays, having a place to do laundry, having an emergency place to stay, and having someone to talk to and discuss problems. This pact is provided to the Juvenile Court as well as the child welfare worker to signify an open commitment to the youth (FosterClub, Inc., 2008).

The National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice and Permanency Planning and the California Permanency for Youth Project have developed the Six Steps

to Find a Family: A Practice Guide to Family Search and Engagement (FSE). This guide is a step by step tool used to locate lifelong connections for foster youth. These steps include: Setting the Stage, Discovery, Engagement, Exploration and Planning, Decision making and Evaluation, and Sustaining the Relationship(s) (as cited in Louisell, 2008).

Techniques used to locate lifelong connections include, but are not limited to, looking through old case files to find paternal family that is often ignored, looking for old letters from family members or NREFM's, sending letters to last known addresses of family members, or solidifying an existing adult relationship. The FSE program reports major successes in their research. In a study conducted in California, 76% of the youth involved in the program found or solidified a legal commitment with an adult (Louisell, 2008).

#### Theories Guiding Conceptualization

According to Bowlby's attachment theory, children who form significant attachments to an adult are more likely to survive and thrive (as cited in Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2007). Bowlby's theory contains different

stages of development. As early as stage two, age three to six months, children can differentiate between primary caregivers and strangers. This is also the stage in which children become aware that when their primary caregiver leaves the room. The last stage, stage five, begins at 12 months of age. This is the time in which young children will express love and seek attention and physical contact (as cited in Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2007). It can be assumed that successful and meaningful attachment plays a vital role in the development of children and can have a major effect on their adolescent and adult transitions because a lack of meaningful connections have been shown to be a predictor in the degree of success in the lives of emancipating foster youth (Mendes and Moslehuddin (2005).

Some research suggests that issues of attachment are at the root of the problems that foster youth face. Attachment appears to be an area of concern especially for children in the foster care system who were taken from their families of origin at an early age. There is concern that the bonds necessary for development are not allowed to form properly due to different foster care placements (Crosson-Tower, 2007). The children may become



confused as to who their primary care providers are, therefore, resulting in a lack of emotional attachment with anyone.

Frey et al. (2008) wrote that youth who presented with a strong emotional connection to an adult tended to perceive themselves as more worthy of care and were more trustworthy of others. They also discovered that youth who did not form secure attachments, were more likely as perceiving themselves as not worthy of care and were more insecure.

Another theory relevant to the outcomes for foster youth is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow describes six basic needs that all individuals need in order to function. Maslow states that infants must first have physical needs met, then safety, belongingness and love, self-esteem, and finally self-actualization (as cited in Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2007). Maslow states that without successful obtainment of one need, a person cannot go on to obtain the next. Therefore, it can be assumed that if a child is in foster care due to neglect, their first basic needs may not have been met and cannot go on to experience true security, belongingness, or self-esteem. Furthermore, if a child's need for love, belongingness

and safety are not they, they cannot move on to obtain the next level of self-esteem and self actualization.

According to Erikson's Eight Stages of Human Development, each person goes through a series of crisis. There are eight stages in all. The first of the eight stages is Trust versus Mistrust. It is in this stage that infant up to 18 months old, learn if they can trust their environment (as cited in Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2007). It can be assumed that if an infant cannot trust their environment due to neglect or abuse that this may have an impact on the way they transition through other life stages. The transition from adolescents into adulthood is called the Intimacy versus Isolation stage. This life stage can present itself with a lot of challenges. Young adults face challenges such as dealing with the loss of relationships, making life altering decisions regarding school, employment, and housing (Mech, 1994). Emancipating foster youth may experience a high degree of difficulty during this stage due to a lack of an adult figure in their lives. This stage is viewed as a crisis for the average developing child but can be experienced as an increased crisis for a foster child whose future is

uncertain and who does not have an adult figure to help resolve their crisis.

### Summary

Much attention has been given to the outcomes for foster youth once they have exited care. Of the articles mentioned, there has been a lack of research conducted as to how adult lifelong connections are formed. Each article suggests that identifying a supportive adult is a key factor in the success of transitioning youth, but they fail to address how these connections are made and how long these connections last. Research is needed to assess these factors. Implementation of techniques such as the Six Steps to Find a Family and the Permanency Pact are promising practices. This study will identify if child welfare workers are aware of these resources, if they have attempted to implement them, and the success of their implementation.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

This section provides a description of the research methods that were used to conduct this study. This section addresses issues such as study design, anticipated limitations, intended procedures, sampling methods, and data collection instruments that were used. The protection of human subjects was considered as well as the methods for data analysis.

#### Study Design

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the techniques used in Riverside County to establish adult lifelong connections for emancipating foster youth and how successful Riverside County is at doing so. Research in this area is needed in order to identify strengths and weaknesses within the Riverside County foster care system. A qualitative research design was implemented for this research to gain insight into the methods Children's Social Service Workers employ to establish adult connections.

The study employed a qualitative design with intended face-to-face interviews with Riverside County Children's Social Service Workers (CSSW) in the PPLA and ILP units and Riverside County Children's Social Service Worker Supervisors (CSSS) in the PPLA and Independent Living Program (ILP) units. Through face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured interview guide, the researcher intended to gain insight into the process that Riverside County CSSW's and CSSS's use in order to establish these connections. These face-to-face interviews allowed the researcher to tailor each interview to fit the participant. The limitations of this study were the availability of research participants as well as the lack of generalizability of the findings. An availability method of data collection was used for participant recruitment.

#### Sampling

The researcher intended on recruiting approximately twelve CSSW's and three CSSS's. A sample size of only 10-15 allowed the researcher adequate time to conduct in-depth interviews as well as an adequate amount of time to analyze the data. The actual number of CSSW's that

were interviewed was six. Only one CSSS was interviewed as well as one Regional Manager. This made a total of eight research participants. Non-probability availability sampling was used to recruit participants for the study. This was due to the lack of time that the researcher had to conduct interviews with all Riverside CSSW's and CSSS's.

#### Data Collection and Instruments

The researcher collected data through face-to-face interviews. Interviews were conducted with CSSW's and CSSS's in the PPLA and ILP units. The researcher developed an interview guide to assist with the interviews (Appendix A). The researcher used open ended questions in order to elicit a more thorough response from each of the participants and obtain clarification if needed.

Topics for CSSW's and CSSS's included any known techniques used to identify adult connections for emancipating foster youth, the rate at which these techniques are implemented, and any known data as to how successful these techniques have been. Demographic information such as age, gender, education level, length

of time employed with Riverside County was obtained from child welfare workers and supervisors.

The researcher used an interview guide as a tool to elicit answers to questions asked. The researcher also allowed for other topics of discussion to arise and explored those issues. An identified strength in this style of data collection was that it allowed for questions to be answered in a more elaborate manner. This form of data collection also had some limitations. Time restraints as well as the inability to interview all CSSW's and CSSS's limited the ability to generalize the results. The researcher took into consideration personal biases and subjectivity while conducting interviews. Personal biases and subjectivity are also limitations in qualitative research.

### Procedures

The researcher contacted the Regional Manager for the Independent Living Region for Riverside County. Through this contact, the researcher was able to obtain a list of CSSW's and CSSS's countywide that work directly with emancipating foster youth in the ILP region. The researcher then sought participants from the Planned

Permanent Living Arrangement (PPLA) units by get a list of the supervisors throughout Riverside County in the these units and request their participation. No specific unit or region was targeted; participants were gathered throughout Riverside County.

The place where the face-to-face interviews were conducted was at the request of the participant. The estimated time for each interview did not exceed one hour. No monetary compensation was provided, but the researcher sent "Thank You" cards to each of the participants to express gratitude for their participation in this study. Data collection began in mid February and was concluded by mid April. The length of time needed to complete the research did not exceed eight weeks.

#### Protection of Human Subjects

Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis. The researcher took steps to ensure the confidentiality of each participant by not disclosing any identifying information throughout the study. Participants were provided with an informed consent form which they signed with a check mark or an "X" acknowledging that they understood the purpose of the study and that their



participation was voluntary (Appendix B). Participants were made aware of their ability to terminate their participation in the research at any time. A debriefing statement was also given to each participant (Appendix C).

### Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis procedures were used in order to analyze the data. Each interview was transcribed verbatim then coded into similar categories in order to be analyzed. A written journal was kept in order to record rules guiding the definitions of the categories and the codes assigned to each category. The researcher identified any common themes that arose during the coding of transcribed interviews. Demographic information for CSSW's and the CSSS was analyzed in order to identify any correlations such as length of time employed with Riverside County and knowledge of existing techniques used to identify adult connections for foster youth. The researcher also hoped to identify a relationship between techniques used to identify adult lifelong connections by CSSW's and the rate of success to which the CSSW reported those connections being made.

## Summary'

The purpose of this study was to identify CSSW's knowledge of available resources to establish adult lifelong connections for emancipating foster youth and the success at which these resources are utilized. Face-to-face interviews with CSSW's and CSSS's allowed the researcher the ability to gain insight as to how successful CSSW's are at establishing adult connections. This study also hoped to identify any needs for improvement in this area. It was suspected that there are no current policies or procedures currently in place to assist CSSW's and CSSS's with accomplishing the task of establishing adult lifelong connections.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

This section will present the findings conducted through the face to face interviews with the research participants. Demographic data will also be presented. An analysis of the data is offered to describe the overall views that children's social service workers have regarding establishing adult lifelong connections for youth who emancipating from care.

#### Demographics

Demographic information was gathered on all research participants. One participant declined to give their age, however, for the remaining seven participants, the ages ranged from 24 to 36, with an average age of 28. All research participants were female. Four of the CSSW's were assigned to the PPLA unit, while two CSSW's were in the ILP unit. One was a regional manager, and the final participant was a supervisor.

In regards to ethnicity, three of the participants were African-American, two were Caucasian, two were Hispanic, and one was bi-racial identifying as

African-American and Caucasian. Each participant was asked how long they had been employed with DPSS. The Regional Manager had 10 years of experience with Riverside County DPSS and the supervisor had 8.8 years of experience. The average amount of experience among CSSW's was 2.42 years with the most experience being 3.083 years and the least experienced worker being employed for 2.25 years.

The participants were asked about their educational backgrounds. All CSSW's interviewed held a Bachelor's degree. Two of those were held in the study of Psychology, two were obtained in Sociology, one in Criminal Justice, and one was held in Liberal Studies. Three of the CSSW's reported that they were currently enrolled in a Master's in School Counseling Program (MA, PPS) and would be completing the requirements of their degrees by the spring of 2009. The CSSS held a degree in Psychology as well. The Regional Manager was a licensed independent clinical social worker (LICSW).

#### Presentation of the Findings

The intent of this study was to examine resources that child welfare workers use to ensure that each child

emancipates from the foster care system with an identified lifelong adult connection. In addition to locating resources used by child welfare workers, this research hoped to identify how successful child welfare workers are at obtaining and maintaining these connections.

The initial research aim was to identify resources. Through analyzing the data in regards to resources, one major theme developed. Resources appeared to be linked to trainings. The trainings were then classified into two groups: informal and formal training. The informal training consisted of staffing cases with supervisors, monthly 17 and over staffings with adoptions workers, and unit meetings. Half of the participants reported that supervision provided them with guidance and direction. A worker in the PPLA unit stated, "We talk about it with co-workers and in staffings. We want that for our kids."

Formal trainings consisted of regional meetings where specific issues were discussed by the Regional Manager. It is through these formal trainings that CSSW's and CSSS's develop an understanding of the laws that govern child welfare. One worker stated, "I became aware of the state mandate (regarding lifelong connections)

through the ILP region. We talk about it at every regional meeting. It's something we focus on a lot right now."

Regional meetings also provide the CSSW's and CSSS's with an understanding of not only the legal responsibilities placed on child welfare workers, but the overall responsibility to the children they serve. Workers are made aware of the dismal outcomes for youth who emancipate such as homelessness and a lack of education. One respondent stated, "I know that from the statistics from the last couple of years that more than half of them don't have a place to go." Another worker stated, "I have come into contact with former foster youth who say they will pursue it (education) and they never do."

The second research aim was to identify how successful child welfare workers are at establishing adult lifelong connections. Determining success in the form of numbers and quantitative data was not possible through this study. However, success was re-defined and placed into three different categories. The first category of success was defined as the value to which CSSW's placed on identifying lifelong connections. When

asked how important having a lifelong connection is for a youth transitioning out of foster care, the responses were overwhelmingly similar and focused primarily on the issue of support and guidance. One respondent stated, "They need somebody to help guide them as far as getting their life together, looking for employment, enrolling in college, and where to go for certain resources." Another PPLA worker stated, "Everybody needs somebody. A lot of them have been in the system so long, they don't have a stable connection with anybody and then they hit 18 and they are out the door. And at 18, how much do you really know?"

The issues of housing, employment, education, identifying adult lifelong connections, and obtaining necessary documents are noted as concerns to address for each child prior to emancipation. Each respondent was asked to rank those issues in order of importance from one to five. Identifying adult lifelong connections was placed as a main concern to address prior to emancipation (Appendix D).

The second category of success was defined as Riverside County's ability to make this issue known to child welfare workers. The researcher asked each

respondent if they were aware of the state mandate that every child have an adult lifelong connection prior to emancipation. All of respondents stated that they were aware of this state mandate. It appears that although no formal policy has been developed, Riverside County is focusing on this issue and making it a priority for ILP and PPLA workers.

A third category of success was defined as the willingness of the child welfare workers to implement a policy should one develop that guided the way lifelong connections were established. All of the respondents reported that they would be willing to implement a new policy even if it proved time consuming. One worker stated, "With anything new, it's more time consuming, but if it means they are going to have a lifelong connection, then yes, I would implement a new policy." All of answers were similar in nature to this response. The issue of lifelong connections appears to be a big focus for the workers in the PPLA and ILP units.

#### Summary

Overall, it appears as though each of the respondents stated an understanding of the importance of



having an identified lifelong connection for emancipating youth. The most common responses were surrounding the issue of continued support and stability. Although resources and successes were identified, Riverside County child welfare workers are not provided with policy and procedures to direct them in establishing lifelong connections.

The overall method for locating a supportive figure appears to be resting in the hands of the child. Most participants stated that they ask the child directly who they identify as their lifelong connection. Once an adult has been identified, there appears to be a lack of follow up to ensure that this connection is genuine and secure. Three of the respondents reported that they make efforts to verify the connections between the child and the identified adult.

In general, participants appeared to be willing to implement policy regarding establishing adult lifelong connections, even if it proved time consuming. The reasons for this related to the value placed on continued support and direction after emancipation. It appears that workers are aware of the need for a supportive adult in

the lives of children, but are unsure of how to establish those connections.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

Chapter five will discuss the implications of the findings presented in chapter four. Limitations of the study will be presented as well as whether or not the findings support the initial research aim. Chapter five will also present any unanticipated results and how the issue of subjectivity and personal biases were handled.

#### Discussion

The goal of this research was to identify the resources child welfare workers are using to establish adult lifelong connections. The results of the data gathered supported the assumption that CSSW's are not provided with any formal practice guidelines to ensure that emancipating youth have a supportive lifelong connection identified, but they are gaining knowledge through trainings, regional meetings, and supervision. All of the seven respondents reported that they are not aware of any current policies or procedures that govern their tasks to identify a supportive adult.

The data further suggests that child welfare workers are unaware of the resources being used such as the Permanency Pact and the California Youth for Permanency Project. It appeared evident that although child welfare workers are aware that lifelong connections are important, they are at a standstill when it comes to making sure this is accomplished and how other counties or states are addressing this issue.

The findings of this research supported information found in articles regarding outcomes for former foster youth. Child welfare workers appeared to be aware of the issues of homelessness and the lack of education. Child welfare workers were aware of the increased risks foster youth face.

The researcher did not anticipate the lack of follow-up that CSSW's reported. All workers reported that they ask the youth themselves who they feel is a trustworthy and supportive person in their lives. Few workers reported that they are making sure that those connections are valid and secure by following up with the identified person. Also, there appeared to be a lack of direction as to how to proceed once a supportive adult is

identified. This appears to be a result of the lack of formal policy and procedure.

#### Limitations

Several limitations were found within this study. One limitation was the lack research participants. Participants were gathered randomly using an availability method. One of the limitations of an availability sampling method is that the participants do not truly represent the entire population of child welfare workers in Riverside County. Another limitation was related to scheduling. Once participants conceded to participate in the study, managing their availability was difficult. On more than one occasion, the researcher received calls from various participants reporting that they had forgotten about the scheduled time they had made for the interview or that the participant was sick and would need to reschedule.

A third limitation was the lack of time the researcher had to conduct the study. The researcher gathered data from mid-February to mid-April. This eight week period did not provide an ample amount of time to conduct a thorough assessment of the resources being used

by CSSW's to identify supportive adults. If more time was allotted, the researcher could have gathered more participants which would have led to a broader scope of the resources being used by CSSW's to locate supportive lifelong connections.

Another limitation of the study was the researcher's inability to conduct interviews with former foster youth. The study would have been more thorough if the researcher was able to meet with former foster youth to discover if they in fact had a supportive adult in their lives. The researcher would have liked to gain insight as to how those connections were made and if their former social workers were responsible for making those connections.

A fifth limitation of the study is the issue surrounding how CSSW's define a supportive lifelong connection. During the interviews, the researcher asked the CSSW's what percentage of the youth on their caseload currently had a supportive adult identified. The responses ranged from 20% all the way to 88%. The question then becomes, "How are child welfare workers defining lifelong connections?" Some CSSW's stated that the lifelong connection is whomever the child identifies. Other workers stated that a lifelong connection is

someone that has personally stated that they are willing to make a connection to a child and that person has proven they are willing to make such a connection through legal proceedings.

A final limitation was the research topic itself. The researcher tried to prevent any issues of personal biases and subjectivity by having a Professor of Social Work and the administrative staff at Riverside County CPS, examine the interview guide for leading questions or implicit biases. However, because all of the questions were focused around the issue of establishing adult lifelong connections, it can be assumed that some of the participants may have felt obligated to state this as a concern in their area of practice.

#### Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

Continued research needs to be conducted in the area of establishing adult lifelong connections for emancipating foster youth. There is currently a limited amount of research specifically addressing the resources child welfare workers use to establish adult lifelong connections. There is even less research on how effective child welfare workers are at doing so. Expanded research

in this area would give child welfare workers a better understanding of the successful techniques that are being practiced by other child welfare workers.

A comprehensive study consisting of child welfare workers and emancipated youth would give social work practitioners a view from the service providers and the recipients themselves as to how successful resources are when applied. A study that followed former foster youth for an extended period of time after emancipation to assess the strength of the lifelong connections made while in foster care, would allow social workers an insight as to how successful their techniques have been.

Social work practice among child welfare workers can be enhanced by developing policy and providing child welfare workers with guidelines to begin the task of establishing adult lifelong connections. Child welfare workers have reported that they feel overwhelmed with the amount of work that is asked of them currently; therefore, utilizing support staff to assist with the family finding aspect of lifelong connections may improve the likelihood that social workers would implement such policy.



## Conclusions

Despite the findings of this study, it should be noted that Riverside County is looking to change the fact that there is no current policy addressing how to establish adult lifelong connections. Administration is in the primary stages of implementing the California Permanency for Youth Project (CPYP). Riverside County will join other California counties in implementing a method that is proving to have notable outcomes. There have been talks of having a "Family Finding" piece to locate lost family members, teachers, siblings, and non-related extended family members (NREFM's) for youth who are preparing for emancipation.

A second piece to the CPYP program is the implementation dealing with loss and grief for the children and their families. Administration believes that although it is important to reconnect children with their families, it is equally important to tackle the issues of loss that the child and family may be coping with. There is a concern of whether or not finding family will have a detrimental effect on the child, if the child has suppressed those feelings of familial loss. Once family is found, the child may display behaviors connected to

feelings of loss, grief, anger, and betrayal by family members who did not maintain a connection with the child. The administration is aware of these concerns and is attempting to develop a comprehensive program that will effectively address these issues. The administration has further expressed their belief that without these two components, the CPYP program will not be fully successful in its mission.

The ILP Region in Riverside County is also exploring ways to expand and provide more effective services for emancipating youth. Recently, the ILP Region has begun the implementation of providing youth with a permanent mailing address through the Department. This service allows for youth who emancipate to use the Riverside County ILP Region as their permanent address in order to decrease the incidents of discontinued MediCal, financial aid for school, or social security benefits. Youth are now able to pick their mail up from the ILP Region until they locate stable housing.

Administration at the ILP Region has further stated that they wish to develop unique and creative ways to maintain contact with youth who emancipate. The region has recently developed a centralized phone number so that

youth can call the ILP Region with a question and the message will be returned within 24 hours. Administration in the ILP Region further hopes to use the internet as a way to allow access of ILP services to emancipating youth.

Through the continued development of new and creative policy, Riverside County is showing that they are committed to providing each child with safety, permanence, and well-being.

APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTERVIEW GUIDE  
(For Child Welfare Workers)

Demographics:

1. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Gender: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Ethnicity:  
1) Caucasian      2) African American      3) Native American  
4) Hispanic/Latino      5) Other
4. Highest level of education completed: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Month and Year hired by Riverside County DPSS: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Title in DPSS (ie.; CSSW, CSSS) \_\_\_\_\_
7. Unit in which you work (ILP, Permanency, etc.) \_\_\_\_\_

Interview Questions:

01. Are you aware of the State mandate that all children emancipating from the foster care need to have a supportive lifelong adult identified prior to emancipation?
02. How did you become aware of this mandate?
03. What techniques or policies are used to enforce this mandate in CPS?
04. Are there any techniques that you are aware of that are not policy but are being practiced?
05. How important do you believe it is to identify a supportive adult connection for emancipating foster youth?
06. Do you believe that there is any need for improvement in this area? Why or why not?
07. Would you be open to implementing new policy, should one develop, that assisted CSSW's with identifying supportive adult lifelong connections?
08. What if these new policies or techniques were time consuming? Would you still be willing to implement them?

09. What do you feel are the most important issues to address before a child emancipates? (Please rank them in order of importance, #1 being the most important)

\_\_\_\_\_ Housing          \_\_\_\_\_employment

\_\_\_\_\_ Education          \_\_\_\_\_Identifying supportive adults

\_\_\_\_\_ Making sure foster youth have necessary documents (Social Security card, birth certificate, etc.)

\_\_\_\_\_ Other

10. Please explain the rationale for your ranking.
11. What percentage of the youth on your caseload have a supportive lifelong adult identified?

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT

## INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to better understand the techniques used in establishing adult lifelong connections for emancipating foster youth. This study is being conducted by Tylia Jones under the supervision of Laurel Brown, Professor of Social Work. This study has been approved by the Department of Social Work Subcommittee of the Institutional Review Board, California State University, San Bernardino.

In this study you will be asked to participate in an interview that will discuss issues relating to identifying and establishing adult lifelong connections for emancipating foster youth. The interview should take about 45 to 60 minutes to complete. The use of an audio recorder will be used during the interviews to record responses. All of your responses will be held in the strictest of confidence by the researcher. Your name will not be reported with your responses. All data will be reported in group form only. You may receive the group results of this study upon completion after September, 2009 at the Pfau Library, California State University San Bernardino.

Your participation in this study is totally voluntary. You are free not to answer any questions and withdraw at any time during this study without penalty. When you complete the interview, you will receive a debriefing statement describing the study in more detail. In order to ensure the validity of this study, we ask that you not discuss this study with other students or participants. There are no direct benefits for participants, however, possible benefits of this study include a better understanding of practices and techniques available to Child Welfare professionals in order to ensure adult lifelong connections for emancipating foster youth. There are no foreseeable risks to participants during this study.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact Laurel Brown at (909) 537-3838.

By placing a check mark in the box below, I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and that I understand, the nature and purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate. I also acknowledge that the researcher will use an audio recorder during the interview and that I am at least 18 years of age.

---

Place a Mark Above

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Today's Date



APPENDIX C  
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

## **Study of Establishing Lifelong Adult Connections for Emancipating Foster Youth Debriefing Statement**

The study you have completed was designed to identify techniques used by Riverside County Child Welfare Workers in establishing lifelong adult connections for emancipating foster youth. This study was also designed to address how successful Child Welfare workers are at establishing these connections prior to emancipation. This study was particularly interested in identifying possible improvements that Riverside County could make in order to better ensure that adult connections are made and sustained after emancipation.

Thank you for your participation and for not discussing the contents of this study with other participants. If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Laurel Brown at (909) 537-3838. If you would like to obtain a copy of the results of this study, please contact the Pfau Library at California State University, San Bernardino, after September 2009.

APPENDIX D  
RANKING OF IMPORTANT ISSUES PRIOR  
TO EMANCIPATION

## Ranking of Important Issues Prior to Emancipation

	Respondent						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Housing	1	4	2	1	3	3	2
Education	2	1	3	2	2	1	3
Documents	3	5	4	4	4	4	4
Employment	4	3	5	5	5	5	5
Identifying Supportive Adults	5	2	1	3	1	2	1
ILP classes	6				6	6	

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